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SUBJECT: WASIT: THE ISSUES, THE LEADERS, POSSIBLE STEPS
FORWARD

Classified By: Classified by Robert Gilchrist, Political Counselor, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Wasit has seen a significant rise in the influence of
Sadrists politicians, who are likely to sweep the next
provincial elections. Highly dependent on agriculture, the
province is plagued by high employment and extreme shortages
of all critical goods. An Iraqi-led effort to disarm
militias to stop violence at its root, along with border
controls and efforts against corruption. This is one of a
series of analyses by Provincial Reconstruction Teams on the
issues, leaders, and possible steps ahead in every province
in Iraq. End summary.

POLITICAL ISSUES

¶2. (C) Currently, Wasit,s Provincial Council (PC) is
dominated by an Islamic coalition composed of SCIRI, Da,wa,
Badr Organization and religious Independents, who captured 31
of 41 PC seats. The governor of the province, Latif Hamad
Turfa, while nominally independent, is closely aligned with
Da,wa, and, almost without exception, follows the line of
the Shi,a Islamist majority. Upcoming provincial elections
will likely see a dramatic increase in the electoral strength
of Sadrists candidates, if support continues at the current
level. There has been a significant increase in the
Sadrists, influence over the PC, despite the fact they hold
only a handful of PC seats. This increased influence has
manifested for two reasons 1) Wasit,s local councils are
dominated by Sadrists and 2) the perception that Sadrists
candidates will do well in the next provincial elections.
Independents are generally politically weak.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

¶3. (C) Wasit is an agricultural-based economy, thanks partly
to the Tigris River that runs through the area. Wasit is
plagued by high employment and extreme shortages of all
critical goods such as gas, propane etc. Electricity is
unreliable and intermittent making it extremely difficult for
business to open with any kind of regularity. The
black-market is flourishing and corruption is endemic and
systemic throughout all levels of government and the business
community. The capital city, Al-Kut, remains the principal
focus of provincial leaders, as such, fair allocation of
reconstruction monies to outlying areas of the province is a
key concern. Internally displaces people continue to stream
in from neighboring Baghdad which only serves to further
stain an already over-taxed social safety network.

SECURITY

¶4. (S) Wasit is strategically important by virtue of its long border with Iran. Many Shi'a religious pilgrims enter Iraq at one of Wasit's border crossings on their way to the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. The province's border with Iran is porous and used for the illegal trafficking of insurgent personnel, drugs, and weapons (rockets, IEDs, EFP etc.). Militia groups have easy access to weapons and financing from Iran, unhindered by inadequately staffed and poorly resourced border checkpoints. CF elements in the province are attacked frequently by these well-stocked militias. Nearly all of the key political leaders and security officials in the province benefit financially from the loose border controls, so there is little movement to improve border checkpoints.

¶5. (C) The area of Suwayra, in northwest Wasit, has a mixed Shi'a-Sunni population and remains a trouble spot for terrorist attacks, typically by former regime elements against Iraqi security forces and civilians.

¶6. (C) Of late, there has been an up-tick in sectarian violence in the Province as various Shi'a militants are perpetrating violent acts against the minority Sunni population.

¶7. (C) The IP Chief, Hussein Abid Al Hady Mahbooba is ineffective and weak. He bends at the whim of the political elite. He says the right things to U.S. interlocutors but

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his actions do not match his rhetoric. He has done little to quell sectarian violence, does not execute arrest warrants) particularly against militia members -- and has done even less to prevent attacks against Coalition Forces.

KEY POLITICAL FIGURES

¶8. (C) Sayyed Shamil) As the representative of Al-Sistani in Wasit he has the ear of all political officials in the province and they are keen to do his bidding.

¶9. (C) SCIRI Head in Wasit, Dr. Ahmed Al Hakeem and Badr Corp Head in Wasit, Sayyed Qasim Al Ar,ajy have emerged as the strongest political players in the province executing SCIRI policy with great skill.

¶10. (S) PC Member and Sadrist, Jawad Magtoof) Heads the Sadrist delegation on the PC and his political influence continues to grow. He is anti-American in the extreme.

POSSIBLE STEPS AHEAD

¶11. (C) In the long-run disarming and disbanding the militias in Wasit would most assuredly serve to reduce violence, preserve democratic institutions, improve security, and promote reconciliation. Special Force and Coalition elements cannot take the lead in fighting militia activity. In PRT's view, each midnight raid and arrest on our part only bolsters popular support for militia groups while diminishing support for Coalition activities, including reconstruction projects. Province-wide buy-in is required if the eradication of militia groups is to be fully effective. Addressing unemployment is a start) but security officials, political and tribal leaders also need to be pressed into taking a firm stance against militias and back those stances up with tangible actions. Iraqis must be seen leading the charge against militia activities, not Americans.

¶12. (C) In the short-run, effective border controls would also help. CF elements and American border teams have put fourth detailed recommendations as to how to tighten the flow of illicit material moving into the province through the border; these recommendations should be implemented immediately. In order to make the recommended changes a reality, modest funds (which could be obtained from the Ministry of Interior) would be required. Also, political pressure should be exerted on those who would lose financially and politically from a more secure Iraq/Iran border. Corruption is also a problem. Provincial leaders should be required to disclose all sources of income, properly account for all high-dollar purchases and have their financial records open for public scrutiny.

SCOBET